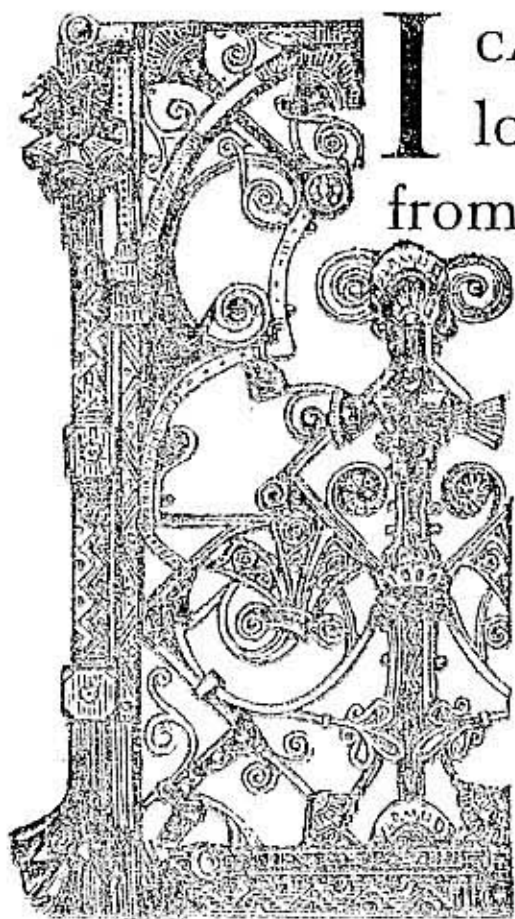


Letter *the* First

Part One

The JOURNEY to RICH BAR

RICH BAR, EAST BRANCH of the NORTH FORK of FEATHER RIVER,
September 13, 1851.



I CAN easily imagine, dear M., the look of large wonder which gleams from your astonished eyes when they fall upon the date of this letter. I can figure to myself your whole surprised attitude as you exclaim, "What, in the name of all that is restless, has sent 'Dame Shirley' to Rich Bar? How did such a shivering, frail, home-loving little thistle ever float safely to that far-away spot, and take root so kindly, as it evidently has, in that barbarous soil? Where, in this living, breathing world of ours, lieth that same Rich Bar, which, sooth to say, hath a most taking name? And, for pity's sake, how does the poor little fool expect to amuse herself there?"

Patience, sister of mine. Your curiosity is truly laudable, and I trust that before you read the postscript of this epistle it will be fully and completely relieved. And, first, I will merely observe, *en passant*, reserving a full description of its discovery for a future letter, that said Bar forms a part of a mining settlement situated on the East Branch of the North Fork of Feather River, "away off up in the mountains," as our "little Faresoul" would say, at almost the highest point where, as yet, gold has been discovered, and indeed within fifty miles of the summit of the Sierra Nevada itself. So much, at present, for our *local*, while I proceed to tell you of the propitious – or unpropitious, as the result will prove – winds which blew us hitherward.

You already know that F., after suffering for an entire year with fever and ague, and bilious, remittent, and intermittent fevers, – this delightful list varied by an occasional attack of jaundice, – was advised, as a *dernier ressort*, to go into the mountains. A friend, who had just returned from the place, suggested Rich Bar as the terminus of his health-seeking journey, not only on account of the extreme purity of the atmosphere, but because there were more than a thousand people

there already, and but one physician, and as his strength increased, he might find in that vicinity a favorable opening for the practice of his profession, which, as the health of his purse was almost as feeble as that of his body, was not a bad idea.

F. was just recovering from a brain-fever when he concluded to go to the mines; but, in spite of his excessive debility, which rendered him liable to chills at any hour of the day or night, he started on the seventh day of June – mounted on a mule, and accompanied by a jackass to carry his baggage, and a friend who kindly volunteered to assist him in spending his money – for this wildly beautiful spot. F. was compelled by sickness to stop several days on the road. He suffered intensely, the trail for many miles being covered to the depth of twelve feet with snow, although it was almost midsummer when he passed over it. He arrived at Rich Bar the latter part of June, and found the revivifying effect of its bracing atmosphere far surpassing his most sanguine hopes. He soon built himself an office, which was a perfect marvel to the miners, from its superior elegance. It is the only one on the Bar, and I intend to visit it in a day or two, when I

will give you a description of its architectural splendors. It will perhaps enlighten you as to one peculiarity of a newly discovered mining district, when I inform you that although there were but two or three physicians at Rich Bar when my husband arrived, in less than three weeks there were *twenty-nine* who had chosen this place for the express purpose of practicing their profession.

Finding his health so almost miraculously improved, F. concluded, should I approve the plan, to spend the winter in the mountains. I had teased him to let me accompany him when he left in June, but he had at that time refused, not daring to subject me to inconveniences, of the extent of which he was himself ignorant. When the letter disclosing his plans for the winter reached me at San Francisco, I was perfectly enchanted. You know that I am a regular nomad in my passion for wandering. Of course my numerous acquaintances in San Francisco raised one universal shout of disapprobation. Some said that I ought to be put into a strait-jacket, for I was undoubtedly mad to think of such a thing. Some said that I should never get there alive, and if I *did*, would not stay a month;

and others sagely observed, with a profound knowledge of the habits and customs of the aborigines of California, that, even if the Indians *did not* kill me, I should expire of ennui or the cold before spring. One lady declared, in a burst of outraged modesty, that it was absolutely indelicate to think of living in such a large population of men, where, at the most, there were but two or three women. I laughed merrily at their mournful prognostications, and started gayly for Marysville, where I arrived in a couple of days, ready to commence my journey to Rich Bar. By the way, I may as well begin the chapter of accidents which distinguished it, by recounting our mule-ride from a ranch ten miles distant from Marysville, where I had spent part of the summer, and where the larger portion of my wardrobe still remained. We had stopped there for one night to enable me to arrange my trunks for the journey.

You have no idea of the hand-to-mouth sort of style in which most men in this country are in the habit of living. Of course, as usual with them, the person who had charge of the house was out of provisions when we arrived. Luckily, I had dined a couple of stages back, and as we

intended to leave on the following day for Marysville, I did not mind the scanty fare. The next morning friend P. contrived to gather together three or four dried biscuits, several slices of hard salt ham, and some poisonous green tea, upon which we breakfasted. Unfortunately, a man whom F. was expecting on important business did not arrive until nearly night, so I had the pleasure of sitting half the day robed, hatted, and gantleted for my ride. Poor P. had been deep in the mysteries of the severest kind of an ague since ten o'clock, and as we had swept the house of everything in the form of bread early in the morning, and nothing remained but the aforesaid ham, it was impossible to procure any refreshment.

About half an hour before sunset, having taken an affecting farewell of the turkeys, the geese, my darling chickens, – about eighty in number, to nearly every one of which I had given an appropriate name, – the dog, a horrid little imp of a monkey, poor P. *and* his pet ague, we started merrily for Marysville, intending to arrive there about supper-time. But, as has been said at *least* a thousand times before, “Man proposes, but God disposes,” for, scarcely had we lost sight of the

house, when, all of a sudden, I found myself lying about two feet deep in the dust, my saddle, being too large for the mule, having turned, and deposited me on that safe but disagreeable couch. F., of course, was sadly frightened, but as soon as I could clear my mouth and throat from dirt, which filled eyes, nose, ears, and hair, not being in the least hurt, I began to laugh like a silly child, which had the happy effect of quite reassuring my esposo. But such a looking object as I was, I am sure you never saw. It was impossible to recognize the original color of habit, hat, boots, or gloves. F. wished me to go back, put on clean clothes, and make a fresh start; but you know, M., that when I make up my *mind* to it, I can be as willful as the gentlest of my sex; so I decidedly refused, and, the road being *very* lonely, I pulled my veil over my face, and we jogged merrily onward, with but little fear of shocking the sensibilities of passing travelers by my strange appearance.

As F. feared another edition of my downfall, he would not allow the mules to canter or trot; so they *walked* all the way to Marysville, where we arrived at midnight. There we came within an ace of experiencing number two of the “acci-

dents," by taking our *nunc dimittis* in the form of a death by starvation. We had not eaten since breakfast, and as the fires were all extinguished and the servants had retired at the hotel, we, of course, could get nothing very nourishing *there*. I had no idea of regaling *my* fainting stomach upon pie and cheese, *even* including those tempting and sawdustiest of luxuries, *crackers*! So F., dear soul, went to a restaurant and ordered a *petit souper* to be sent to our room. Hot oysters, toast, tomatoes, and coffee – the only nourishment procurable at that hour of the night – restored my strength, now nearly exhausted by want of food, falling from my mule, and sitting for so many hours in the saddle.

The next morning, F. was taken seriously ill with one of his bilious attacks, and did not leave his bed until the following Saturday, when he started for Bidwell's Bar, a rag city about thirty-nine miles from Marysville, taking both the mules with him, and leaving me to follow in the stage. He made this arrangement because he thought it would be easier for me than riding the entire way.

On Monday, the 8th of September, I seated myself in the most excruciatingly springless wagon

that it was ever my lot to be victimized in, and commenced my journey in earnest. I was the only passenger. For thirty miles the road passed through as beautiful a country as I had ever seen. Dotted here and there with the California oak, it reminded me of the peaceful apple-orchards and smiling river-meadows of dear old New England. As a frame to the graceful picture, on one side rose the Buttes, that group of hills so piquant and saucy, and on the other, tossing to heaven the everlasting whiteness of their snow-wreathed foreheads, stood, sublime in their very monotony, the summits of the glorious Sierra Nevada.

We passed one place where a number of Indian women were gathering flower-seeds, which, mixed with pounded acorns and grasshoppers, form the bread of these miserable people. The idea, and the really ingenious mode of carrying it out, struck me as so singular, that I cannot forbear attempting a description. These poor creatures were entirely naked, with the exception of a quantity of grass bound round the waist, and covering the thighs midway to the knees, perhaps. Each one carried two brown baskets, which, I have since been told, are made of a species of osier, woven with a neatness which is

absolutely marvelous, when one considers that they are the handiwork of such degraded wretches. Shaped like a cone, they are about six feet in circumference at the opening, and I should judge them to be nearly three feet in depth. It is evident, by the grace and care with which they handle them, that they are exceedingly light. It is possible that my description may be inaccurate, for I have never read any account of them, and merely give my own impressions as they were received while the wagon rolled rapidly by the spot at which the women were at work. One of these queer baskets is suspended from the back, and is kept in place by a thong of leather passing across the forehead. The other they carry in the right hand and wave over the flower-seeds, first to the right, and back again to the left, alternately, as they walk slowly along, with a motion as regular and monotonous as that of a mower. When they have collected a handful of the seeds, they pour them into the basket behind, and continue this work until they have filled the latter with their strange harvest. The seeds thus gathered are carried to their rancherías, and stowed away with great care for winter use. It was, to me, very interesting to watch their regular motion,

they seemed so exactly to keep time with one another; and with their dark shining skins, beautiful limbs, and lithe forms, they were by no means the least picturesque feature of the landscape.

Ten miles this side of Bidwell's Bar, the road, hitherto so smooth and level, became stony and hilly. For more than a mile we drove along the edge of a precipice, and so near, that it seemed to me, should the horses deviate a hairbreadth from their usual track, we must be dashed into eternity. Wonderful to relate, I did not "Oh!" nor "Ah!" nor shriek *once*, but remained crouched in the back of the wagon, as silent as death. When we were again in safety, the driver exclaimed, in the classic patois of New England, "Wall, I guess yer the fust woman that ever rode over that are hill without hollering." He evidently did not know that it was the intensity of my *fear* that kept me so still.

Soon Table Mountain became visible, extended like an immense dining-board for the giants, its summit a perfectly straight line penciled for more than a league against the glowing sky. And now we found ourselves among the Red Hills, which look like an ascending sea of crimson waves, each

crest foaming higher and higher as we creep among them, until we drop down suddenly into the pretty little valley called Bidwell's Bar.

I arrived there at three o'clock in the evening, when I found F. in much better health than when he left Marysville. As there was nothing to sleep *in* but a tent, and nothing to sleep *on* but the ground, and the air was black with the fleas hopping about in every direction, we concluded to ride forward to the Berry Creek House, a ranch ten miles farther on our way, where we proposed to pass the night.

